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To cite this article: Roland Boer (2016) Stalin and Proleptic Communism, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 17:2-3, 162-171, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2016.1222940](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1222940)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1222940>



Published online: 02 Sep 2016.



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Stalin and Proleptic Communism

Roland Boer

School of Liberal Arts, Renmin University of China, Beijing, PR China; School of Humanities and Social Science, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia

ABSTRACT

This discussion article concerns the implicit idea of proleptic communism in the thought of Joseph Stalin. This idea refers to the sense that communism is creatively present as a type of reverse causality, determining the nature of the present even though it remains to be achieved. I situate this approach to communism in terms of the theological doctrine of proleptic eschatology. Functioning as a response to the delay of the Parousia (Christ's return), this form of eschatology may also be found in Eastern Orthodox theology. In order to render explicit the implicit idea of proleptic communism in Stalin's thought, the argument requires two steps: to track the way Stalin pushes the era of communism (in distinction from socialism) into a well-nigh mythical future; to espy the contours of proleptic communism. My specific aim is to understand an unacknowledged feature of Stalin's thought, without taking sides in the perpetual polarisation over his legacy.

My argument is that 'proleptic communism' is an unacknowledged feature implicit in the thought of Joseph Stalin. Proleptic communism at a theoretical level means that the future state of communism creatively determines and is thereby actual in the present, although it has not yet been fully achieved. The idea is drawn from the theological doctrine of proleptic eschatology, although I should say that the idea of prolepsis is implicit in Stalin's thought and needs to be brought to the surface. This requires two steps: to track the way Stalin pushes the era of communism (in distinction from socialism) into a well-nigh mythical future; to espy the contours of proleptic communism. I stress that my resolute focus is philosophical, dealing with Stalin's thought rather than historical and political issues (except where pertinent).¹

CONTACT Roland Boer  roland.boer@newcastle.edu.au

¹I am in relatively uncharted waters with this material. While there are many good studies devoted to archival work, very few deal with Stalin's thought – as expressed in his writings – in light of his complex connections with theology. I have learnt much from the important work of Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967 [1949]); Robert William Davies, Mark Harrison and Stephen Wheatcroft, eds, *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913–1945*, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980–2003); Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: Norton, 1990); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Steven Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004); David Priestland, *Stalinism and Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Domenico Losurdo, *Stalin: Storia e critica di una leggenda nera*, trans. Marie-Ange Patrizio (Rome: Carocci editore, 2008); Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Michael

Before doing so, let me briefly outline the theological doctrine of proleptic eschatology, which arose as one creative response to the ‘delay of the Parousia’ – the growing awareness that Christ was not in a hurry to return, which may itself be seen as the productive force for theology itself.² Proleptic eschatology designates a sense of the future that is ‘creatively present to all the temporal things that precede this future’.³ It is neither pushed into a distant future, nor is it realised fully in the present. Instead, the present is understood in terms of prolepsis, in which events happen ‘before their time’.⁴ This eschatological future is creatively at work in the present, yet it will achieve its full manifestation only in that future. Although we are still on the way to becoming ourselves, we are ‘in some sense already the persons we shall be in the light of our eschatological future’.⁵ Traces of such an approach may also be found in Eastern Orthodox theology, in which the anticipated eschaton permeates in every way the time already begun with the coming and resurrection of the ‘last Adam’. Through the Church, its liturgy, icons and the ‘spiritual way’, ‘the whole of Christian theology is eschatological’. We live in ‘time by that which is beyond time; living by that which is not yet come, but which we already know and possess’.⁶ Indeed, it is something we can ‘taste here and now’ – the leitmotiv being the Transfiguration of Christ (Mark 9). The Kingdom of heaven is thus both at hand and awaiting fulfillment, so much so that history itself is created out of the delay of the Parousia.

I have of course emphasised a proleptic dimension to Eastern Orthodox theology due to Stalin’s unique situation of having been the only world communist leader with an extensive theological education (1895–1899).⁷ However, I need not argue for a direct appropriation, but rather a thought world in which prolepsis is not a foreign idea.

Mythical Communism

The first step in explicating proleptic communism in Stalin’s thought (which assumes the Bolshevik innovation of distinguishing between the eras of socialism and

David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Volume I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, trans. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). The exception here is Erik Van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002). This study does pay attention to Stalin’s thought, but on a political register rather than one that examines the theological issues in relation to socialism and communism. By contrast, the work of Halfin makes loose connections with religious thought, without detailed attention to Stalin’s works: Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999). The only work that attempts to pay attention to theological matters neglects to deal with the issues of socialism and communism: Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Pisatel’ Stalin* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002). And I have argued elsewhere that the somewhat common suggestion that Marxism is a secularised version of Christian eschatology, first proposed by Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev, *Wahrheit und Lüge des Kommunismus*, trans. Ives Schor (Lucerne: Vita Nova, 1934); Roland Boer, ‘Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered’, *Mediations*, 25:1 (2011), pp. 39–60.

²Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume II: History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 247–251. With the delay, four responses may be discerned: (1) revitalised and intensified expectation; (2) realised eschatology, inaugurated by Christ’s first appearance; (3) explanation of the delay, with a number of conditions to be met before Christ’s return; (4) proleptic eschatology.

³Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–93), vol. 3, p. 531.

⁴Pannenberg, op. cit., pp. 580–646; Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1965).

⁵Pannenberg, op. cit., pp. 603–604.

⁶Alexander Schmemmann, ‘Liturgy and Eschatology’, *Sobornost* 7:1 (1985), pp. 9–10; see also Dimitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), vol. 2, p. 61; Georges Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, vol. 4, *Collected Works* (Belmont: Nordland, 1975), p. 66.

⁷See further Mikhail Agursky, ‘Stalin’s Ecclesiastical Background’, *Survey*, 28:4 (1984), pp. 1–14.

communism)⁸ concerns what may be called mythical communism. This entails a pushing out of the stage of communism into an ever more distant future, so much so that it gains near mythical status. The first signal of this mythical communism appears in a fascinating discussion from 1929, in which the issue concerns nationalities and languages, specifically in regard to the eventual unity of many different peoples in a universal communist polity. Initially, Stalin adheres to Lenin's position concerning the stages that enable classless society and the integration of diverse nations within communism.⁹ Each would require a preliminary stage characterised by diversity and emancipation rather than unity. Many socialists took this a step further and argued for a universal language.¹⁰ But the way Stalin interprets Lenin's text is intriguing: he initially discerns two stages on the path to global communism: (1) during the dictatorship of the proletariat and socialism in one country, we may expect a fluorescence of peoples, cultures and languages; (2) only under world-side communism does it become possible to consider overcoming divisions and explore what a global proletarian culture might be.¹¹

At the same time, Stalin begins to stretch out the interim, pushing the era of full communism further and further into the future. So he emphasises Lenin's phrase concerning the 'very, very long time [*ochen' i ochen' dolgo*]' that it will take for global communism

⁸This distinction is at times attributed to Marx's 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', in which he speaks briefly of a first and a higher phase of 'communist society': Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24, pp. 75–99 (Moscow: Progress, 1875 [1989]), p. 87; 'Kritik des Gothaer Programms' in *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I.25, pp. 3–25 (Berlin: Dietz, 1875 [1985]), p. 15. However, Marx speaks only of a 'higher stage' and does not specify that it would be restricted to two. He also does not distinguish between socialism and communism in terms of such stages. This innovation was Lenin's, in his interpretation of Marx's text. Lenin writes that the 'scientific distinction between socialism and communism is clear'; indeed, what 'is usually called socialism was termed by Marx the "first", or lower, phase of communist society': V.I. Lenin, 'The State and Revolution' in *Collected Works*, vol. 25, pp. 385–497 (Moscow: Progress, 1917 [1964]), p. 475; 'Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia. Uchenie marksizma o gosudarstve i zadachi proletariata v revoliutsii. Avgust–sentjabr' 1917 g.; rane 17 dekabria 1918 g.' in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 33, pp. 1–120 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1917 [1969]), p. 98. See also V.I. Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution: Draft Platform for the Proletarian Party' in *Collected Works*, vol. 24, pp. 55–92 (Moscow: Progress, 1917 [1964]), pp. 84–85; 'Zadachi proletariata v nashei revoliutsii (Proekt platformy proletarskoj partii), 10 (23) aprilia 1917 g.' in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 31, pp. 149–186 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1917 [1969]), pp. 179–180; 'Report on Subbotniks Delivered to a Moscow City Conference of the R.C.P.(B.), December 20, 1919' in *Collected Works*, vol. 30, pp. 283–288 (Moscow: Progress, 1919 [1965]), p. 284; 'Doklad o subbotnikakh na Moskovskoi obshchegorodskoi konferentsii RKP(b), 20 dekabria' in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 40, pp. 32–38 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1919 [1974]), p. 33. Stalin followed Lenin's lead.

⁹V.I. Lenin, 'The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination: Theses' in *Collected Works*, vol. 22, pp. 143–156 (Moscow: Progress, 1916 [1964]), p. 147; V.I. Lenin, 'Sotsialisticheskaia revoliutsiia i pravo natsii na samoopredelenie (Tezisy)' in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 27, pp. 252–266 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1916 [1969]), p. 256; quoted in I.V. Stalin, 'The National Question and Leninism: Reply to Comrades Meshkov, Kovalchuk, and Others', in *Works*, vol. 11, pp. 348–372 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1929 [1954]), pp. 360–361; I.V. Stalin, 'Natsional'nyi vopros i leninizm: Otvet tovarishcham Meshkovu, Koval'chuku i drugim', in *Sochineniia*, vol. 11, pp. 333–355 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1929 [1949]), p. 345; see also Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 245–249. Note: In following references, I will not give the full publication details for Stalin's *Works* and *Sochineniia*. After the 13th volume, they are published by Red Star Press in London and Izdatel'stvo 'Pisatel'' in Moscow.

¹⁰See further Roland Boer, 'Babel Versus Pentecost: Stalin and the Dialectics of Linguistic Diversity', *Studies in East European Thought* (In press).

¹¹Stalin, 'The National Question and Leninism', pp. 357–360; 'Natsional'nyi vopros i leninizm', pp. 341–345; see also Stalin, 'Political Report of the Central Committee to the Sixteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B.), June 27, 1930' in *Works*, vol. 12, pp. 242–385 (pp. 378–379); 'Politicheskii otchet Tsentral'nogo Komiteta XVI s'ezdu VKP(b), 27 iunia 1930 g.' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, pp. 235–373 (pp. 367–368); 'Reply to the Discussion on the Political Report of the Central Committee to the Sixteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B.), July 2, 1930' in *Works*, vol. 13, pp. 1–17 (pp. 3–8); 'Zakliuchitel'noe slovo po politicheskomu otchetu TSK XVI s'ezdu VKP(b), 2 iulia 1930 g.' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 1–16 (pp. 3–7); 'Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics', in *Works*, vol. 16, pp. 146–183 (179–181); 'Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznanii' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 16, pp. 104–138 (pp. 136–137).

with its global language to arrive.¹² A couple of years earlier, in response to a question from the first labour delegation from the United States, Stalin comments laconically: 'Clearly, we are still a long way [*eshche daleko*] from such a society.'¹³ The sense of delay increases in the 1930s, precisely in the context of the socialist offensive. For instance, in a speech to collective farm shock-brigaders in 1933, Stalin observes that a 'happy, socialist life is unquestionably a good thing'. 'But', he continues, 'all that is a matter of the future'.¹⁴ And in his report to the seventeenth congress in 1934, he speaks poetically of 'the commune of the future', which will be based on high technical achievements, abundance and collective living in all dimensions.¹⁵ 'When will that be?' He asks in his typical catechetical style. 'Not soon, of course [*Konechno, ne skoro*].'¹⁶ Yet the question remains: when? Let me return to the text on nationalities and cultures from 1929. Stalin adds yet more reasons for the delay of communism: a common and global socialist culture must arise from the processes of class solidarity rather than a decree from above; one must be infinitely patient, for distinct peoples and languages 'possess an extraordinary stability and tremendous power of resistance'.¹⁷ In fact, a universal culture and society will not happen even in the second stage that Stalin mentioned earlier – of the global victory of communism and the establishment of a universal dictatorship of the proletariat. This stage marks only the beginnings of communism, for which we now need a third and near mythical stage in which communism 'becomes part and parcel of the life of the peoples'.¹⁸ For this to happen, communism – in economics, politics and culture – must become second nature to human beings and the planet.

By now communism has been delayed into a far-distant and barely articulated third stage, taking on near mythical characteristics. I am tempted to describe this move as an Althusserian argument *avant-la-lettre*: communism will appear in the last instance, but the last instance is so far in the future that it effectively never comes.¹⁹ Each time a delay was encountered, each time capitalism seemed to consolidate, each time a revolution elsewhere failed, the interim was extended yet again. As with the delay of the Parousia among the early Christians, what was initially seen as a brief and transitional period had become the 'new normal'. Yet, Althusser's point is not that the determining instance never comes, that it has become a well-nigh unattainable goal, but that its effect is

¹²V.I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder' in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 17–118 (Moscow: Progress, 1920 [1966]), p. 92; V.I. Lenin, 'Detskaia bolezn' "levizny" v kommunizme' in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 41, pp. 1–104 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1920 [1969]), p. 77; Stalin, 'The National Question and Leninism', p. 361; 'Natsional'nyi vopros i leninizm', p. 346. This crucial phrase is quoted on a number of occasions: Stalin, 'To Comrade M.I. Ulyanova: Reply to Comrade L. Mikhel'son' in *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 154–157 (p. 156); 'Tovarishchu M.I. Ul'ianovoi: Otvet tovarishchu L. Mikhel'sonu' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 10, pp. 149–152 (p. 151); 'Political Report of the Central Committee', p. 374; 'Politicheskii otchet Tsentral'nogo Komiteta', p. 363.

¹³Stalin, 'Interview with the First American Labour Delegation, September 9, 1927' in *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 97–153 (p. 140); 'Beseda s pervoi amerikanskoï rabochei delegatsiei, 9 sentiabria 1927 g.' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 10, pp. 92–148 (p. 134).

¹⁴Stalin, 'Speech Delivered at the First All-Union Congress of Collective-Farm Shock Brigaders, February 19, 1933' in *Works*, vol. 13, pp. 242–263 (p. 252); 'Rech' na Pervom Vsesoiuznom s'ezde kolkhoznikov-udarnikov, 19 fevralia 1933 g.' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 236–256 (p. 245).

¹⁵Stalin, 'Report to the Seventeenth Party Congress on the Work of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U.(B.), January 26, 1934' in *Works*, vol. 13, pp. 288–388 (p. 360); 'Otchetnyi doklad XVII s'ezdu partii o rabote TSK VKP(b), 26 ianvaria 1934 g.' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 282–379 (p. 353).

¹⁶Stalin, 'Seventeenth Party Congress', p. 360; 'XVII s'ezdu partii', p. 353.

¹⁷Stalin, 'The National Question and Leninism', p. 363; 'Natsional'nyi vopros i leninizm', p. 347. The emphasis on the stability of language would become the leitmotiv of his later essay on linguistics: Stalin, 'Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics'; 'Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznaniiia'.

¹⁸Stalin, 'The National Question and Leninism', p. 364; 'Natsional'nyi vopros i leninizm', p. 349.

¹⁹Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977), p. 113.

profoundly dialectical.²⁰ I propose that a significant dialectical dimension concerns proleptic communism.

Proleptic Communism

To recap, the theory of proleptic eschatology assumes a reverse causality, so much so that future events happen in the present. The present cannot be understood without such a creative force, which provides the basis for the anticipated future. Yet the eschatological future is not entirely manifest in the present, for it awaits the realisation of the fullness of time. Stalin seems to be in two minds, stressing at times what may more easily be seen as a proleptic position, in which communism transforms socialism, and at others distinguishing the two more sharply. Indeed, the need for new differences arises out of the increasing sense of the potential for socialism and communism to merge. Yet as he does so, he creates new ground for possible fusion. He cannot seem to escape the proleptic power of communism no matter which way he moves.

I begin with the tendency to fusion between the two stages by comparing some of Stalin's earlier depictions of a communism to come with his claims, beginning in the 1930s, concerning achieved socialism. Thus, he initially depicted communism in terms of free and collective labour, collective ownership of the means and instruments of production, socialist planning and organisation of society, a planned high-technology economy, no more antitheses between town and country and between agriculture and industry, material and cultural wellbeing, the flowering of arts and science, true individual freedom, withering away of the state and, of course, 'from each according to ability, to each according to need'.²¹ At the time, Stalin made it quite clear that such a society would not arrive soon, that it was very much a society of the distant future.

Nonetheless, in a few years he began to appropriate some of these features for socialism, especially in light of the claim that socialism had become 'the sole system in the whole of the national economy', that capitalism had been overcome in industry and agriculture, with a consequent improvement in material and cultural life.²² Feature by feature, socialism begins to resemble the former descriptions of communism. Now, he argues, labour has become free and collective, for the exploiters have been eradicated and the means and instruments of production are in the hands of workers and labouring peasants. Property

²⁰Other features of dialectical effect of mythical communism, in terms of opening up a space for socialism, include: the diversity and unity of languages and cultures; the intensification of class conflict as the goal drew nearer; socialism in one country as never secure without global socialism; strengthening the state as the means to its withering away. I am unable to deal with these topics here.

²¹Stalin, 'Anarchism or Socialism?' in *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 297–373 (pp. 336–337); 'Anarkhizm ili sotsializm?' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, pp. 294–372 (pp. 335–336); 'Interview with the First American Labour Delegation', pp. 139–141; 'Beseda s pervoi amerikanskoi rabochei delegatsiei', pp. 133–135.

²²Stalin, 'Seventeenth Party Congress', p. 340; 'XVII s'ezdu partii', p. 333; see also Stalin, 'Dizzy with Success: Concerning Questions of the Collective-Farm Movement' in *Works*, vol. 12, pp. 197–205 (p. 197); 'Golovokruzhenie ot uspekhev: K voprosam kolkhoznogo dvizheniia' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, pp. 191–199 (p. 191); 'Address to the Graduates from the Red Army Academies (Delivered in the Kremlin, May 4, 1935)' in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 71–79 (p. 75); 'Rech' v Kremlevskom dvortse na vypuske akademikov Krasnoi Armii, 4 maia 1935 goda' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, pp. 58–63 (p. 60); 'On the Draft Constitution of the USSR: Report delivered at the Extraordinary Eighth Congress of Soviets of the USSR, November 25, 1936' in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 151–197 (pp. 157–163); 'O proekte konstitutsii soiuza SSR: Doklad na chrezvychainom VIII vsesoiuznom s'ezde sovetov, 25 noiabria 1936 goda' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, pp. 119–147 (pp. 123–126); 'Report on the Work of the Central Committee to the Eighteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B.) (Delivered March 10, 1939)' in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 355–429 (pp. 372–397); 'Otchetnyi doklad na XVIII s'ezde partii o rabote TSK VKP(b), 10 marta 1939 goda' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, pp. 290–341 (pp. 302–321).

is owned collectively, either by the state on behalf of workers or by collective farms. This has led to the end of unemployment in towns and of poverty in the countryside. The difference between town and country has begun to disappear, with modern apartments for workers and villages characterised by public farm buildings, clubs, radio, cinemas, schools, libraries and crèches. Farmers increasingly work collectively on the best land, with the cooperative use of modern technology such as tractors, harvester combines, threshing machines and automobiles. Further, production in industry and agriculture has made the shift from the profit motive to planned guidance, with the result of increasing material and cultural wellbeing.²³ Even national income has begun to focus on needs, being distributed for the purpose of raising material standards and increasing production. All of this based on the fact that the workers and labouring peasants are masters of the country, working not for capitalists but for themselves and for society as a whole. As he adds yet more items to the description of socialism, he seeks to counter the impression that one may sit back and relax, for he urges his listeners and readers to continue to strengthen the system and overcome the myriad problems that remain.²⁴

Not much seems to remain for communism, since most of the items listed above have now been appropriated for socialism (I speak theoretically, for the practical realisation remains open to debate). One way of interpreting such appropriation is that socialism was gradually drawing nearer to communism. Once the last items had become reality – such as global socialism, the withering away of the state and the principle of ability and needs – one would have communism in a type of evolutionary development based on reform. Indeed, in his report to the eighteenth congress of 1939, Stalin argues for a shift in phases within socialism. It had moved from internal class conflict, from a period of persistent struggle, conflict, setbacks and victories, to one in which class conflict had been eradicated. All that remained was vigilance against interference from the capitalist encirclement. Yet, this incremental reading is really a minimalist approach; I prefer a more robust interpretation in which socialism cannot avoid the creative power of communism, so much so that socialism was beginning to resemble communism in many ways. It was, as it were, being drawn into the present from its near mythical status in a distant future. Even more, communism takes on a causative role in the present, thereby establishing the groundwork for its full realisation.

The risk is that socialism becomes indistinguishable from communism the more features from the latter appear in the former. But this is not by any means the end of process: the more they seem to draw nigh to one another, the more Stalin seeks out other ways to distinguish them. He could fall back on the conventional stages theory of socialism-communism, but few categories remain to distinguish the two. Or he could introduce new qualifications to differentiate the two from one another and maintain

²³Stalin, 'Seventeenth Party Congress', pp. 343–346; 'XVII s"ezdu partii', pp. 336–339.

²⁴Stalin, 'Political Report of the Central Committee to the Sixteenth Congress', pp. 330–332; 'Politicheskii otchet Tsentral'nogo Komiteta', pp. 321–322; 'First All-Union Congress of Collective-Farm Shock Brigaders', pp. 247, 250–256; 'Pervom Vsesoiuznom s"ezde kolkhoznikov-udarnikov', pp. 241, 244–249; 'Seventeenth Party Congress', pp. 340–343; 'XVII s"ezdu partii', pp. 333–336; 'Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 199–239 (articles 1–12); *Konstitutsiia (osnovnoi zakon) soiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik* (Moscow: Garant, 1936 [2015]), stat'ia 1–12. For more elaborate warnings, see the texts concerning 'dizzy with success': Stalin, 'Dizzy with Success'; Stalin, 'Golovokruzhenie ot uspekhov'; 'Seventeenth Party Congress', pp. 384–385; 'XVII s"ezdu partii', pp. 375–376; 'Speech in Reply to Debate, 5 March 1937' in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 275–296 (pp. 283–292); 'Zakliuchitel'noe slovo na Plenum TSK VKP(b), 5 marta 1937 goda' in *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, pp. 174–188 (pp. 179–185).

communism in its role of the last instance that never comes. This is precisely what he does on at least two occasions, one concerning equality and the other commodities and value under socialism. In each case, the effort at distinction produces yet further ground for the proleptic power of communism upon socialism.

Already in the 1930s, Stalin attacked the assumption that socialism is at core a project of equalisation, ranging all the way from wages to wearing the same clothes and eating the same food in the same quantity. Not so, he says, for that is a petty-bourgeois assumption, or perhaps one worthy of simple peasant ‘communism’ or gatherings of ascetics. Instead, Marxism and Leninism acknowledge the reality of differences in wages depending upon skills and capabilities and the nature of the work performed. Only with such differences can one encourage workers to increase their skills and capabilities.²⁵ Further, tastes and needs among human beings vary, so that equalisation in all realms of life is absurd. At heart is the tension between individual and collective. Stalin comes out strongly on the collective side, arguing that Marxism concerns freedom from exploitation, classes and private property.²⁶ The individual, as determined by the collective in which true individuality arises,²⁷ is constituted by his or her differences. Throughout this argument, the underlying assumption is that the existence of differentiation is a feature of socialism. Yet on two occasions, Stalin opens up the possibility that it will continue in communism. He does so by broaching the point that recompense for work entails differences in needs between people. They are recompensed at different levels depending on skills and the quantity and quality of labour performed. Indeed, ‘it is quite clear that people’s needs vary and will continue to vary under socialism’.²⁸ Only under communism will labour become voluntary work for society and people will be recompensed according to needs. Does this mean that communism will see the overcoming of differences and the achievement of equalisation? Not quite, for the very principle indicates otherwise: from each according to ability and to each according to need assumes differentiation in terms of both abilities and needs. If so, then socialism has drawn nigh to the proleptic power of communism, precisely at the moment that Stalin seeks to differentiate them.

The second and more extended example comes from the late work, ‘Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR’.²⁹ Along with his essay on linguistics, this work is part of an effort to argue for certain type of scientific stability in terms of ‘laws’ (subject to historical change), especially after the long decades of revolutionary upheaval and wars with foreign powers. The central categories of Marxist economic theory provide the basis, such

²⁵Stalin, ‘New Conditions – New Tasks in Economic Construction, Speech Delivered at a Conference of Business Executives, June 23, 1931’ in *Works*, vol. 13, pp. 53–82 (pp. 57–62); ‘Novaia obstanovka – novye zadachi khoziaistvennogo stroitel’sтва: Rech’ na soveshchanii khoziaistvennikov, 23 iunია 1931 g.’ in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 51–80 (pp. 55–60).

²⁶Stalin, ‘Seventeenth Party Congress’, pp. 361–364; ‘XVII s’ezdu partii’, pp. 354–356; ‘Talk with the German Author Emil Ludwig, December 13, 1931’ in *Works*, vol. 13, pp. 106–125 (pp. 120–121); ‘Beseda s nemetskim pisatelem Ėmilem Liudvigom, 13 dekabria 1931 g.’ in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 104–123 (pp. 118–119).

²⁷Stalin, ‘Marxism Versus Liberalism: An Interview with H. G. Wells’ in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 21–44 (pp. 26–27); ‘Beseda s angliiskim pisatelem G.D. Uellsom 23 iulija 1934 goda’ in *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, pp. 24–39 (pp. 27–28); see also Stalin, ‘Interview Between J. Stalin and Roy Howard’ in *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 133–147 (pp. 143–144); ‘Beseda s predsedelem amerikanskogo gazetnogo ob’edineniia “Skripps-Govard N’iuspeipers” gospodinom Roĭ Govardom, 1 marta 1936 goda’ in *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, pp. 103–112 (p. 110).

²⁸Stalin, ‘Emil Ludwig’, p. 120; ‘Ėmilem Liudvigom’, p. 118; see also Stalin, ‘Roy Howard’, p. 143; ‘Roĭ Govardom’, pp. 109–110.

²⁹Stalin, ‘Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR’ in *Works*, vol. 16, pp. 222–296; ‘Ėkonomicheskie problemy sotsializma v SSSR’ in *Sochineniia*, vol. 16, pp. 154–223.

as the forces and relation of production as the two dimensions of social production, but Stalin develops specific features that are important for my argument.

Of these I focus on three: commodity production, the law of value and the continuation of contradictions between forces and relations of production.³⁰ Each of them provides a new way to distinguish the conventional stages of socialism and communism. To begin with, commodities (which exist in many forms outside capitalism) are very much present in the era of socialism, albeit in a rather different way. The reality is that two sectors exist, one run by the state the other by collective farms. The latter produce goods they need to sell to state-owned companies and individuals, for which in turn they receive commodities. All this happens in a way that harnesses commodity production for a very different purpose: socialist commodity production without capitalists. So too with the law of value, which exists under socialism as part of commodity production and consumption. Although Stalin sees a particular benefit, especially for the economic planners and directors who need to understand and act upon the law of value, he argues that it too is harnessed for a very different economic and social system from capitalism. In this case, the crucial factors are social ownership of the means of production and proportionate development of the economy, subject to the five-year plans, in contrast to the anarchy and crises of capitalism in which value reigns supreme. In other words, like commodity production, the law of value is a servant of a socialist economy and not its master. The third item is perhaps the most telling, for it sums up the previous two. In a subsequent section of his study (in reply to Yaroshenko), Stalin argues that contradictions between the forces and relations of production continue under socialism, albeit in a new way. While the relations in question conform to productive forces, the very fact that the latter are growing means that contradictions are bound to emerge. As the forces leap ahead, the relations of production lag, especially in the commodity exchange between the state and collectively owned sectors. Indeed, they may hamper the growth of the production forces, so that it is necessary for planning bodies to act in order to prevent such tensions from becoming antagonistic. Ultimately, of course, the aim is to eliminate the tensions by carefully converting collective farm property into public property and replacing commodity exchange with products exchange.³¹

This final point indicates that Stalin is keen to maintain the differences between socialism and communism, although he has had to develop a number of new categories in order to do so. While socialism has tensions between the forces and relations of production, as well as commodity production and the law of value, under communism they will disappear. With commodities, he suggests that in the future era there will no longer be two sectors but one all-embracing and national sector in which commodities and its 'money economy' will disappear. Similarly, with the law of value, in communism the amount and distribution of labour will not be regulated in the roundabout way of value, but directly. Thus, production will be regulated by the needs of society and computing such needs will be the main task of planning bodies.³² Through these arguments a

³⁰Stalin, 'Economic Problems' pp. 230–241; 'Ékonomicheskie problemy' pp. 159–170. He also argues for the abolition of essential differences between town and country and between mental and physical, but the continuation of inessential (that is, comradesly) differences: Stalin, 'Economic Problems', pp. 241–245; 'Ékonomicheskie problemy', pp. 170–174.

³¹In other words, the process from socialism to communism is that of reform after the revolution.

³²Stalin, 'Economic Problems' pp. 234–235, 239, 293–294; 'Ékonomicheskie problemy' pp. 164–165, 169, 221–222.

reformulation of the two principles of socialism and communism – to each according to work versus to each according to need – seeks to maintain the distinction.³³ Indeed, for Stalin, the principle of recompense according to work entails the harnessing of commodity production and the law of value for the sake of different socioeconomic formation; by contrast, recompense according to need means that both have become irrelevant under communism.

Throughout, Stalin always has his eye on what communism might be, in a way that betrays its proleptic role in the very act of distinguishing it from communism. This role emerges once again in the fascinating final couple of pages of the long study on economic problems, where he spies the first shoots of communism in terms of even these new categories.³⁴ The topic concerns the transformation of collective farms into public property (for they were still the property of the collectives). As he had pointed out on a number of occasions, the existence of two sectors (state and collective) and the commodity relations between them would not remain under communism. How to achieve the transition? Already the land and means of production are public and labour is cooperative. So the only real property of the collective farms are the agricultural products and especially the surplus products that become commodities for exchange. Here may a transformation be effected: since such commodities are the greatest hindrance to collective farms becoming fully public, they need to be transformed into direct products exchange between state industry and the collective farms. Actually, suggests Stalin, this is already happening through the ‘merchandising’ of produce such as cotton, flax and seed. Or rather, this should be called ‘products exchange’ – precisely what is needed for communism. They are nothing less than *zachatki*, the first rudiments, beginnings, inception or, most appropriately, a dawn of communism, already emerging within socialism. And they should be extended, without hurry but persistently and consistently until the whole economy operates in such a fashion. In the process, the collective farms would also become public property.

The upshot is quite extraordinary, for communism is already dawning or being born within socialism. Or in the terms I have been using, the proleptic power of communism shows up once again even within his new categories of differentiation. Perhaps it is not for nothing that he tended to use socialism and communism interchangeably even in his later writings.

To sum up, I have argued that careful attention to Stalin’s thought as expressed in his written work reveals the development of what may be called ‘proleptic communism’. This process involved two complex steps, based on the distinction between socialism and communism. Initially, Stalin pushed the arrival of communism into a distant future, so much so that it became almost mythical. But then Stalin began to appropriate certain features for the arrival of socialism, which he and other Bolsheviks claimed had been achieved in the 1930s. In this process, the communism of the future can be seen to influence and shape the present, so much so that Stalin had to develop further distinctions between the two. This is

³³Stalin, ‘Economic Problems’ pp. 272, 275; ‘Ékonomicheskie problemy’, pp. 202, 205.

³⁴Stalin, ‘Economic Problems’, pp. 294–295; ‘Ékonomicheskie problemy’, pp. 222–223.

what I call at a philosophical level ‘proleptic communism’, by analogy or translation with the theological category of ‘proleptic eschatology’.

Notes on Contributor

Roland Boer is Xin Ao Distinguished Research Professor, Renmin University of China, Beijing, and Research Professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia.